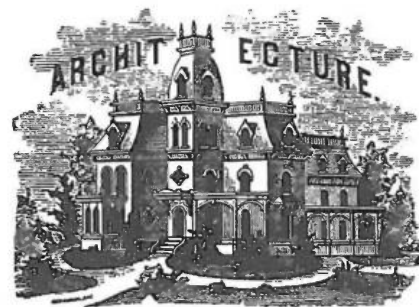


# A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



**Patrick C. Keely**  
1816-1896

Roman Catholic Church architecture in Maine reflects the whole field's development in the eastern United States. From the 1840s to the turn of the 20th century, Gothic Revival churches began to appear in major centers of Catholic population on the northeast coast. Patrick Charles Keely was the first architect in the United States to concentrate almost exclusively on Roman Catholic institutional work. In Maine Keely designed the mother Church of Catholicism, the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Portland, as well as three Gothic Revival parish churches.

Born in Kilkenny, Ireland, on August 9, 1816,<sup>1</sup> Keely had no formal schooling in architecture, but he was trained in the builder's trade by his father, whose name, according to local Irish records, appears to have been either John or William Keely. The elder Keely had built Catholic Church structures of note in Ireland, including St. Patrick's College in Thurles.<sup>2</sup> Keely also undoubtedly was influenced by the Gothic Revival works of A.W.N. Pugin in

England and Ireland, and he frequently read illustrated publications such as the *London Art Journal*.

Discrimination against Roman Catholics in Ireland left little chance for economic achievement, so Keely joined the millions of Irish who emigrated to the Western Hemisphere, landing in New York in 1842.<sup>3</sup> He settled in Brooklyn, but found only menial work in carpentry at first. After performing some notable woodworking on metropolitan New York churches, he came to the attention of Rev. Sylvester Malone, pastor of Sts. Peter and Paul's parish in Williamsburgh, Kings County, New York.

Father Malone wanted Keely to design a Gothic-style church for him in 1847. Bishop John Hughes of New York objected to Keely's plans at first, thinking the building would be too ornate and expensive.

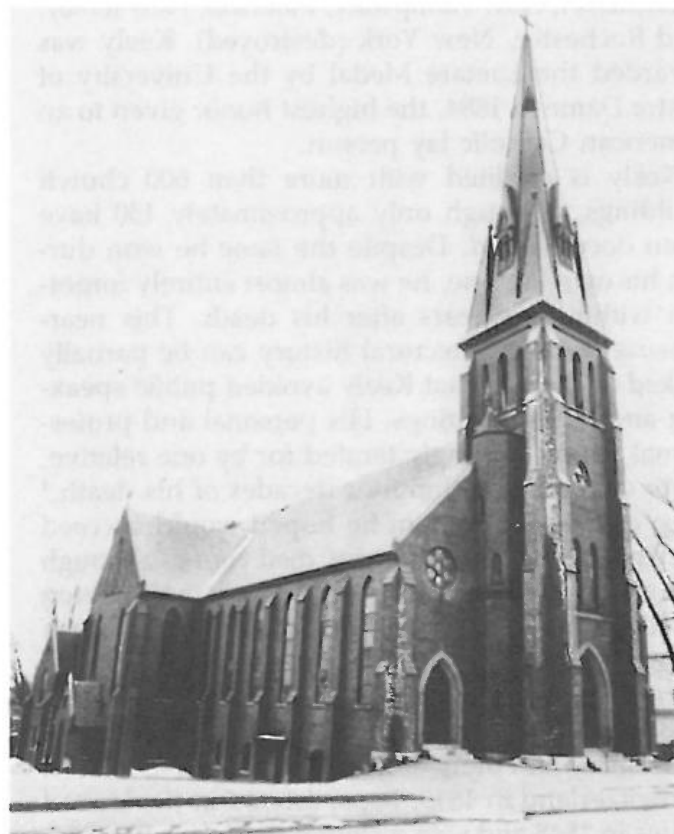


Figure 1. St. John's Catholic Church, Bangor, c. 1976 view (MHPC).

But Malone returned with a detailed set of expenses, and Hughes, seeing how little it would actually cost, gave his assent.

When the new church in Williamsburgh was completed, the young designer's reputation began to spread by word-of-mouth among area Catholic priests. Soon he received commissions for churches throughout the New York area and beyond, as pastors and bishops tried to fill their expanding building needs due to the growing numbers of immigrants from Ireland and Germany.

In 1848 Bishop John McCloskey of Albany asked Keely to erect a cathedral for his new diocese. By this time, Keely's professional reputation was well established. Before the end of his career, he would come to be known internationally as "The Church Builder" and would design the Catholic cathedrals in Hartford, Connecticut (destroyed); Chicago, Illinois; Portland; Boston, Massachusetts; Newark, New Jersey (the old cathedral); Albany, New York; Brooklyn, New York (destroyed); Buffalo, New York; Cleveland, Ohio; Erie, Pennsylvania; Providence, Rhode Island; Charleston, South Carolina; Burlington, Vermont (destroyed); Halifax, Nova Scotia; and St. John, New Brunswick. He also designed churches that later were elevated to cathedral status in Bridgeport, Connecticut; Fall River, Massachusetts; Springfield, Massachusetts; Manchester, New Hampshire; Paterson, New Jersey; and Rochester, New York (destroyed). Keely was awarded the Laetare Medal by the University of Notre Dame in 1884, the highest honor given to an American Catholic lay person.

Keely is credited with more than 600 church buildings, although only approximately 150 have been documented. Despite the fame he won during his own lifetime, he was almost entirely forgotten within five years after his death. This near-erasure from architectural history can be partially linked to the fact that Keely avoided public speaking and left no writings. His personal and professional papers, lovingly tended for by one relative, were destroyed within four decades of his death.<sup>4</sup> Two of his sons, whom he hoped would succeed him in the field of architecture, died young, although one son-in-law whom he trained, Thomas Houghton (1840-1913), did design numerous buildings of note in his career.

Keely's first project in Maine is St. John's Church in Bangor. The parish was organized by the Jesuit missionary and pioneer Rev. John Bapst, S. J. Born in Switzerland in 1815, Bapst arrived in the United States in 1848 and was assigned to Maine. By 1854, however, the xenophobia aroused by the Know-Nothings and the American Nativists had raised anti-Catholicism to a fevered pitch. On October 14, 1854, Bapst was seized by a rowdy mob in Ellsworth,

where he had journeyed to visit a parishioner. He was assaulted, cursed, stripped, tarred and feathered, and ridden out of town on a wooden rail. The already physically frail priest was found the next day by his friends, who sheltered him and tended to his wounds. News of his treatment produced outrage in Bangor, and local Protestants and Catholics issued quick public condemnations of the attack.

Father Bapst, who had been pastor of St. Michael's in Bangor, already had decided that the parishioners there were in serious need of a new and more impressive church. Soon after his recovery, he put aside fears of new religious tensions and obtained plans from Patrick Keely for a grander church, which he renamed St. John's.

The new church was completed in 1856, although its spire was not added until 1874 (Figure 1). Its basic configuration, a long nave with a tower in the center of the principal facade and transepts toward the rear, is characteristic of Keely's handling of Gothic architecture. The main entry is gained through the tower, which has a belfry and a broached spire. Windows and doors are lancet arched, and the buttressing is purely decorative. With limited funds available, intricate carved ornamentation was sacrificed for the inspirational effect to be gained through the soaring monumentality of both the exterior and the interior. The interior is particularly impressive with its magnificent groined ceiling supported on either side by rows of clustered columns on either side of the nave. St. John's is especially important for its largely intact 19th century interior paint scheme, much of it the work of Maine's most important Catholic fresco artist, Charles J. Schumacher of Portland.

Keely also designed the original Catholic church in Biddeford, St. Mary's, at about the same time as St. John's was started (Figure 2). The Catholics in that city, under Father Thomas Kenny, hired Keely "to draft plans for a lanceted Gothic brick church with a seating capacity of eight hundred."<sup>5</sup> The building committee wrote a letter published in the *Boston Pilot* of July 12, 1856 informing the editors that "in a short time" the Catholics of Biddeford would be worshipping in their own church.

A third Keely designed parish church, St. Joseph's in Lewiston, was begun in 1865 and completed in 1867 (Figure 3). Both the Biddeford and Lewiston churches followed the same format as St. John's in Bangor, but were smaller and less ornate. The Lewiston church, for example, featured a square tower with a simple broached spire, while the windows and doors of the Biddeford church lacked stone trim. St. Mary's was torn down and replaced in 1923, but St. Joseph's still stands on Lewiston's Main Street.



Figure 2 St. Mary's Catholic Church, Biddeford, c. 1910 view (MHPC).

Keely's most notable work in Maine is the Roman Catholic Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Portland (Figure 4). The cathedral was designed by Keely for the first bishop of the diocese of Portland, David W. Bacon. Keely was known to the new bishop since both had lived in Brooklyn, New York, and, as the then-pastor of the Assumption Church in Brooklyn, Bacon had officiated at Keely's wedding to Sarah Farmer in 1846.<sup>6</sup>

When he was named to the diocese in 1854, Bacon's first thoughts for an architect for a new cathedral turned to Keely. But the work of putting the diocese on a sound footing, combined with financial and pastoral concerns, kept him from starting the cathedral in earnest until 1859. Ground was broken in 1860, but the coming of the Civil War halted construction efforts.

The building of Immaculate Conception resumed in 1866, but misfortune continued to plague the project. The cornerstone was laid on May 31st of that year, but on July 4th a disastrous fire swept Portland, and the cathedral was destroyed, along with scores of other structures. Since many local Catholic families were reduced to poverty by the city-wide fire, the cathedral project had to be delayed again. Nonetheless, a brick chapel, designed by Keely, was dedicated on December 23, 1866. Bacon embarked on a fund-raising tour of the U.S. and Canada for two months to gather money to rebuild.

In April, 1868, construction was again started and pushed to completion. The cathedral was dedicated

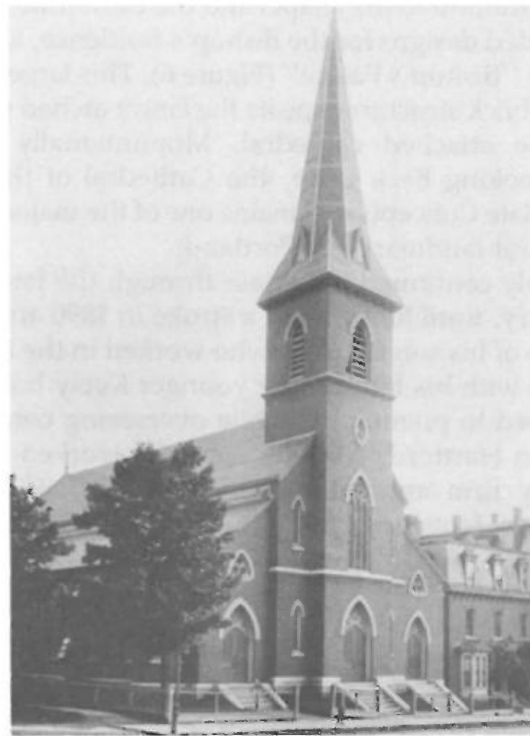


Figure 3 St. Joseph's Catholic Church, Lewiston, 1893 view (MHPC).

on September 8, 1869, but not without another disaster. While the prelates, priests, and guests celebrated the new cathedral's dedication at a dinner that night, a freak storm hit Portland. Its high winds soon toppled the main spire on the cathedral and sent it crashing into a neighboring house. Miraculously, no lives were lost, but Bishop Bacon now faced the agonizing task of rebuilding once more. Two months later, the spire was replaced at considerable cost.

The cathedral enlarged upon Keely's basic Gothic style format. With aisles on either side of the nave and full clerestory, the cathedral was then the largest Gothic church in Maine. An elaborate description provided by a local newspaper described the church as "...a fifteenth-century Gothic brick edifice with freestone trimmings, the foundation being granite."<sup>7</sup> The front of the cathedral has "...a great buttressed tower, surmounted by a spire which rises to a height of 236 feet, and the massive structure is balanced on the other side of the central gable by a smaller tower and a pinnacled turret."<sup>8</sup> Between these towers is a lancet arched entrance vestibule, above which is a great rose window.

Equally imposing is the interior, particularly the nave which is flanked on both sides by eight clustered columns supporting an elaborate groined ceiling (Figure 5). Carved wooded Gothic openwork enclosed the sanctuary, which is lighted by the clerestory windows.



In addition to the chapel and the cathedral, Keely provided designs for the Bishop's residence, known as the "Bishop's Palace" (Figure 6). This large three story brick structure repeats the lancet arched motifs of the attached cathedral. Monumentally sited overlooking Back Cove, the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception remains one of the major architectural landmarks of Portland.

Keely continued his career through the late 19th century, until he suffered a stroke in 1890 after the death of his son Charles, who worked in the family office with his father. The younger Keely had succumbed to pneumonia while overseeing construction in Hartford. Another son who worked in the family firm and who intended to follow in his father's footsteps, John, had died several years earlier.

Grieved by the loss of his sons, Keely remained bedridden until his death on August 11, 1896. A wider degree of architectural immortality might have come to him but for another misfortune. One of his finest designs was to have been built as the new cathedral for his home city of Brooklyn. The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Brooklyn, whose cornerstone was laid in 1868, was never completed, since the bishop of Brooklyn decided that other diocesan projects had a greater priority. The unfinished cathedral, which would have been larger than New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral and would have been based loosely on 13th-century French Gothic churches in Rouen, France, remained standing like a medieval ruin until 1931, when it was demolished.

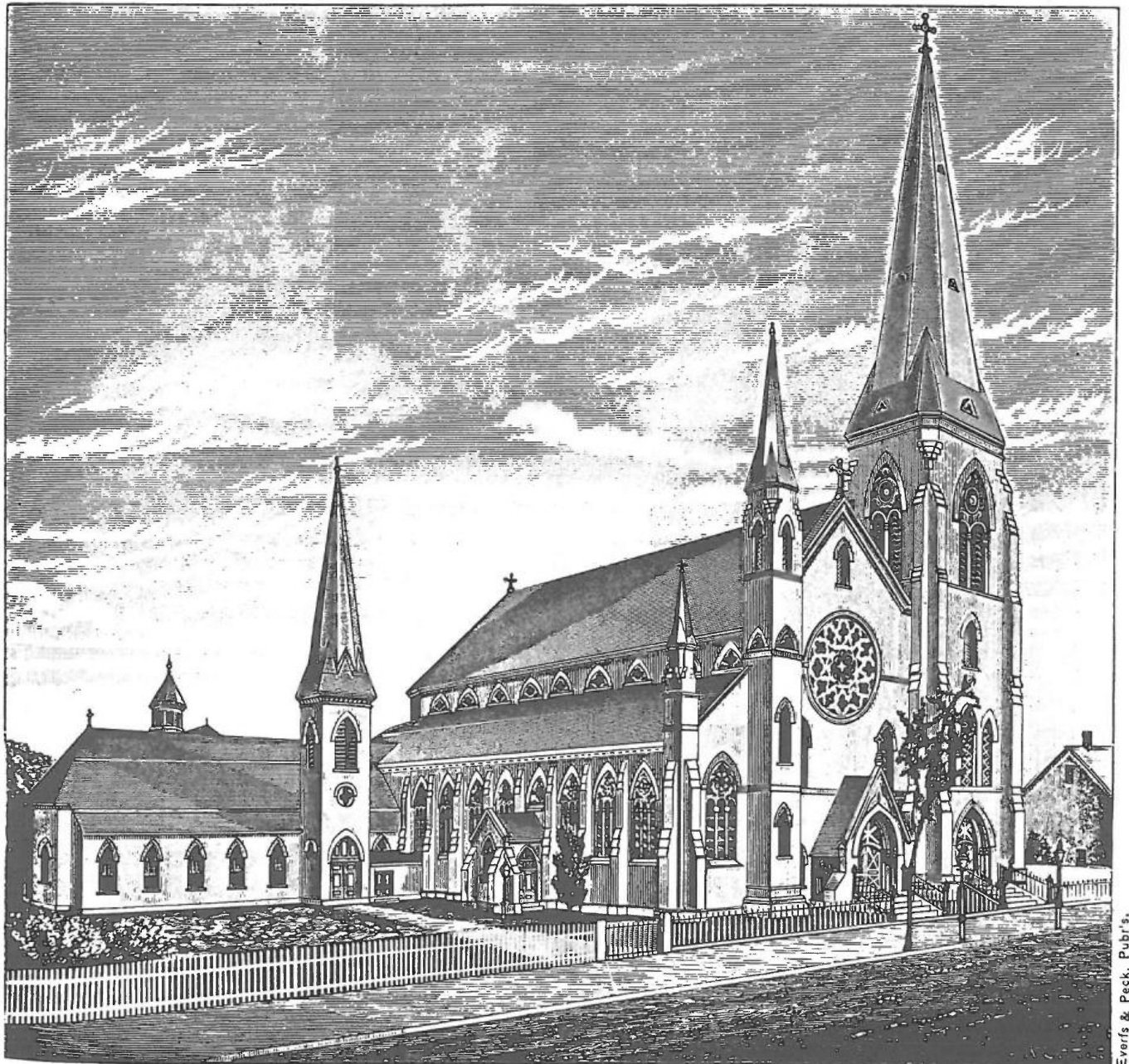


Figure 4 Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception and Chapel, Portland, 1880 view (MHPC).



Figure 5 Interior of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Portland, c. 1910 view (MHPC).

Other noteworthy Catholic church designers worked in Maine, but in the churches of Patrick Keely the state possesses some fine examples of the works of the "paterfamilias" of the field. Although Keely was primarily a professional loner — he wrote nothing for publication and did not use his office as an "atelier" or teaching studio save for his sons and son-in-law — he did bring an artistic and social depth to his buildings.

Keely's works passed from favor soon after his death. Catholic architects as well as firms specializing in church design flourished from the 1880s to the 1920s. Keely's time had come and gone, for the newer firms often worked in classical revival forms and eschewed the "old" Gothic. Keely, then, was dismissed as a "man of lesser gifts".<sup>9</sup>

In a eulogy one month after Patrick Keely's death, Father Malone of Brooklyn remarked that the architect's works helped to assuage anti-Catholic feelings: "The effect of the beautiful Gothic style on the prejudiced mind of New England within the half century must have softened opposition and won many to the doctrine of at least *fair* play to Catholics."<sup>10</sup> In truth, many with Know-Nothing sympathies did regard the newly-arrived immigrant Catholics as near-savages incapable of artistic achievement. Keely's work proved them wrong and provided the immigrant population with a new sense of self-esteem in their heritage, as well as a nostalgic reminder of the churches they had left behind.

Robert T. Murphy  
February, 1987



Figure 6 Bishop's Residence, Portland, c. 1870 view  
(Courtesy of Maine Historical Society).

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Walter A. Daly, *Patrick Charles Keely: Architect and Church Builder* (unpublished master's dissertation), Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., 1934, p. 3. See also Sylvester L. Malone, *Henry McCaddin Memorial Dedication Souvenir*, Brooklyn, 1898, p. 71, and Richard J. Purcell, "P.C. Keely: Builder of Churches in the U.S.," in *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society*, Vol. 54 No. 4, December, 1943, Philadelphia, p. 209. The Purcell article and the Daly thesis are two of the better sources of factual information on Keely's early life and career, and the McCaddin booklet contains a few pages on Keely's life based on material supplied by Father Sylvester Malone, a close friend of Keely's. Interviews of then-surviving family members by the author in the early 1970s fixed the place and date of his birth as August 9, 1816 in Kilkenny. Other printed sources had given various other places and dates.

- <sup>2</sup> Francis W. Kervick, *Patrick Charles Keely*, South Bend, Ind., 1952, p. 5. This privately printed book on Keely by the late head of the University of Notre Dame's architecture department is extremely sketchy and disappointingly contains numerous errors of fact, including church attributions and dates. Nevertheless, it remains one of the few published works on Keely and is a starting point for researchers.
- <sup>3</sup> Purcell, p. 209; Malone, p. 71; Kervick, pp. 5-6.
- <sup>4</sup> Results of investigation by the author in the early 1970s. Keely's life and works were then being researched for a projected doctoral dissertation, but his papers were scattered and destroyed.
- <sup>5</sup> William L. Lucey, S.J., *The Catholic Church in Maine*, Francetown, N.H., 1957, p. 157.
- <sup>6</sup> Kervick, p. 19.
- <sup>7</sup> William Byrne, et al, *History of the Catholic Church in the New England States*, Boston, 1899, Vol. 1, pp. 501-503. Quoted article appears on p. 503. See also Lucey, p. 178-187.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Ralph Adams Cram, "On the Contemporary Architecture of the Catholic Church," *Catholic World*, Vol. 58, No. 347, Feb. 1894, p. 655ff. See also Charles D. Maginnis, "The Work of John T. Comes," *Architectural Review*, Vol. 55, 1924, pp. 93-101.

#### LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY PATRICK C. KEELY

St. John's Catholic Church, Bangor, 1855-56, Extant.  
 St. Mary's Catholic Church, Biddeford, 1856, Destroyed.  
 St. Joseph's Catholic Church, Lewiston, 1865-67, Extant.  
 Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception Chapel, Portland, 1866, Extant.  
 Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Portland, 1868-69, Extant.  
 Bishop's Residence, Portland,, 1868-69, Extant.

Photograph of Patrick C. Keely  
 Courtesy of the Author

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